

Lowering Your Risk of Preterm Birth

A self-study lesson

Welcome! Thank you for coming to WIC today. This lesson is for pregnant mothers or any woman who could become pregnant. You will learn about your risk of having a baby born too soon or too small. Why will you learn about this? In 2001, more than 476,000 babies were preterm or born before 37 weeks. When a baby is born too soon or too small, there is a risk of the baby having serious health problems. Many of the babies who do survive have lifelong health problems. Every woman who is pregnant or who could become pregnant should know about preterm birth, the warning signs of preterm birth and steps she can take to help prevent preterm birth.

What is preterm birth?

Preterm birth is any birth that occurs before the 37th week of pregnancy which is more than 3 weeks before your due date. Compared to other babies, pre-term babies are more likely to face lifelong health problems or even die in the first month of life. Some of the problems they may face include cerebral palsy, blindness and lower mental function.



Babies who are not born early stay in the hospital, on average, about 2 days. Babies who are born too early or too small have to stay in the hospital longer. Babies who are premature stay in the hospital for weeks or months. The medical bills for these babies may be hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Who is high risk for preterm labor? What increases your risks of preterm labor?

Every woman is at risk for preterm labor. How can you know if you are at increased risk for preterm birth? You are at high risk if you:

- ❖ Have had a previous preterm birth
- ❖ Are pregnant with twins, triplets or more
- ❖ Have certain uterine or cervical problems

If you have any of these three risk factors, it is important for you to know the signs and symptoms of preterm labor and what to do if they occur.

There are some lifestyle factors that may also put you at higher risk for preterm birth. They are:

- ❖ Late or no prenatal care
- ❖ Smoking
- ❖ Drinking alcohol
- ❖ Using illegal drugs
- ❖ Exposure to the medication DES
- ❖ Domestic violence, including physical, sexual or emotional abuse
- ❖ Lack of social support
- ❖ Stress
- ❖ Long working hours with long periods of standing
- ❖ Under age 18 or over the age of 40



Certain medical conditions during pregnancy may increase the risk that a woman may go into preterm labor. They include:

- ❖ Urinary tract infections, vaginal infections, sexually transmitted infections
- ❖ Diabetes
- ❖ High blood pressure
- ❖ Clotting disorders
- ❖ Bleeding from the vagina
- ❖ Certain birth defects in the baby
- ❖ Being pregnant after in vitro fertilization (IVF)
- ❖ Being underweight before pregnancy
- ❖ Obesity

- ❖ Short time between pregnancies (less than 6-9 months between birth and the beginning of the next pregnancy).

What are the signs of preterm labor?

If you are thinking of becoming pregnant, or are pregnant, what can you do to lower your risk of having a baby too soon? If you know someone who is thinking of becoming pregnant, or is pregnant, how can you encourage her to lower her risk of preterm birth? These are some important things to think about.

Now let's discuss how you can be prepared to notice the signs of going into labor too soon.

The signs of preterm labor are:

1. Contractions (your abdomen tightens like a fist), especially more than six in one hour.
2. You notice a change in vaginal discharge (leaking of fluid, mucus or bleeding from your vagina).
3. Pelvic pressure—the feeling that your baby is pushing down.
4. Low, dull backache.
5. Cramps that feel like your period.
6. Abdominal cramps (stomach upset) with or without diarrhea.

What to do if you have these signs:

1. Call your care providers to tell them the warning signs you are having.
2. Don't delay in going to the hospital if you can't speak with someone or think you are going into preterm labor.

If you are less than 5 ½ months (22 weeks) pregnant, go to the Emergency Room (ER) of the hospital. If you are greater than 5 ½ months (22 weeks) pregnant, then go to the Labor and Delivery Department of the hospital.



What can you do to help prevent preterm labor?

1. Know the warning signs! Know what to do if you have any of them (see previous page for action to take).
2. Get regular prenatal checkups. See your health care provider before your 13th week of pregnancy and have at least 13 visits. (It is easy to remember as 13/13). If possible, see your health care provider before you get pregnant.
3. Reduce stress. What are some ways you can decrease your stress?
4. Don't smoke. If you can't quit smoking, try to cut down. Avoid secondhand smoke.
5. Don't drink alcohol or use illegal drugs.
6. Call your health care provider if you feel burning or pain when you urinate. You may have an infection that can increase the risk of preterm birth.
7. If you are in an abusive (if someone is hurting you) relationship, talk to someone. Abuse often gets worse during pregnancy. Do what you need to do to protect yourself and your baby.

Remember, preterm contractions may be stopped, which is why early detection can prevent preterm birth and serious life long complications in the infant. Every day that the baby stays inside the uterus, the chances of a better outcome are higher.



Reference used for the self-lesson: www.marchofdimess.com

We hope you enjoyed this lesson on preterm birth!

Please answer the following questions. When you are done, give this sheet to your WIC teacher. If you have other questions about this lesson, ask your WIC teacher.
Thank you!



1. What can happen to your baby if he or she is born too soon?
2. Name one sign of preterm birth.
3. What is something that can put you at risk of having your baby early?
4. What can you do if you think you are going into preterm birth?
5. What can you do to help prevent preterm birth?
6. How can you help someone who is pregnant or who might become pregnant prevent preterm birth?